HABITS OF THE HEART

October 25, 1987, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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Scripture
Matthew 16:21-28

"What profit is there if you gain the whole world - and lose your soul?"
-Matthew 16:26

The best commentary on our text I know of is a play by the late T. S. Eliot, The Cocktail Party (1949). Eliot was a great poet and man of letters. He was deeply concerned about the values which were emerging in in post World War II culture.

The play begins at a party in the London flat of Edward and Lavinia Chamberlayne. Edward is having an affair with Celia who is also at the party. Lavinia has discovered the affair and has, that day, left Edward. She is having an affair with Peter who is also at the party. But Peter really has eyes for Celia, etc., etc. The conversation is stilted, trite,... as it wears on interminably, Celia emerges as a main character. Devastated by the end of her love affair with Edward who really wants to remain with Lavinia, Celia sees a psychiatrist.

"Even if I find my way out of the forest," she says, "I shall be left with an inconsolable memory of the treasure I went into the forest to find... and never found, and which was not there... and perhaps is not anywhere... I want to be cured of a craving for something I cannot find and of the shame of never finding it. Can you cure me?"

The doctor tells her she must choose her own treatment. She can "avoid excessive expectations - find a husband with whom to breed children they won't understand and who won't understand them." Or, "there is another way, if you have the courage... it requires faith. The destination cannot be described, you will know very little until you get there; you will journey blind. But the way leads toward possession of what you have sought for in the wrong place."

Two years later there is another cocktail party. All are present but Celia. They learn that shortly after the last party Celia joined a nursing

order and was assigned to a remote Pacific island to take care of native people who were dying of an incurable disease. There, while ministering to them, she died. Because of ignorance and misunderstanding they had killed her.

Eliot's point is forcefully made. The contrast is striking. Celia, among all those petty, self-indulgent people at the party, has chosen life by deciding to live for something other then self. It was her cure. She had found life by giving life away.

This is Stewardship Sunday. And stewardship is a euphemism church people sometimes use to describe fund-raising. But this is not a sermon about money. This is a stewardship sermon about saving your life by losing it. Now, before the Stewardship Committee of this church has a corporate seizure, let me say, simply and clearly, that there is nothing wrong with money. In fact, Jesus talked more about money than he talked about heaven, perhaps not as relentlessly as the television evangelists do, but then again, he didn't have the overhead they do.

But he did talk about money... and he did talk about following him in a world where money often represents our skills, hopes, our energy and our faith.

How we use our money is the basic way we express who we are and what we believe. Regardless of what we say in creeds and hymns - our personal credo is written in our check stubs. This church attempts to be the body of Christ on this busy intersection of modern, urban life. We attempt to gather up the best faith of all of us and express it - to this city, to the world, and for the world. It takes a lot of money. And I am confident that the members and friends of this church will continue to support it generously as it moves into the future.

In fact, doing that, supporting the church responsibly and faithfully, is a part of that larger, radical commission of our Lord's - to save life by losing it.

That radical saying of Jesus', didn't come out of the blue. It was precipitated by a famous incident which involved the disciples - and Peter. One day - he asked them what people were saying about him. They told him they had heard some suggest that he was John the Baptist - others thought he was one of the old prophets... He brushed that aside and redirected the question to them: "Who do you say that I am?" Peter surprised everyone - including himself by blurting out an astonishing statement: "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God."

And then, in light of that moment of truth, Jesus begins to explain that the meaning and purpose of his life will be in giving it away...

Earlier this fall I preached on that wonderful interchange between Jesus and Peter... I told how important that passage had been to me... How I had written my Senior paper on it, and in the process had read everything anyone ever wrote on Jesus' famous question and Peter's famous answer...

I told how I had chosen that text for the first sermon I ever preached in my home church, the Sunday after I was ordained. That sermon was preached to a congregation which included my friends, and all my relatives. Actually I had prepared a homiletical masterpiece to meet the standards of the faculty of the Divinity School of the University of Chicago. Unfortunately, none of them were present. Nevertheless, I dazzled them with my footnotes. Afterward, Dad sat me down, told me how proud he was, complimented me and said, "You told us what Karl Barth and Paul Tillich thought about who Jesus is. When you preach on that text again, leave some time at the end for what you think."

That was good advice. There is a time when each of us must let go of academic speculation and say what it is we believe. There is a moment when we know that one more resource, one more theologian on the topic of the nature of Jesus of Nazareth, is irrelevant because it's time for us to say what we believe. But, true as that is, if we stopped here with our personal testimony, if we defined our faith as the answer to the question - "Who do you say that I am?" - we would end up back where we started, with a truncated, retarded religion which consists of theological formulas, or personal testimonies about Jesus. And this text won't allow for that.

There is incredible energy and momentum here. The incident keeps moving ahead, past personal theological reflection, past personal testimony, to personal life. Jesus himself won't allow it to get bogged down in a seminar on Christology. Peter's answer, theologically correct and personally honest, is not enough. It is not really the point.

"If you would come after me, take up your cross." Not - get your theology straight; not even accept the Lord Jesus as your personal savior, but, "if you would come after, take up your cross."

And... "whoever would save life will lose it, and whoever loses life for my sake will find it."

That is so powerful, so profoundly radical, that I fear we don't hear it. It is the essence of Christianity.

If we look at that statement from the point of view of secular disciplines, it would seem to be unnatural, a denial of our fortuitous instinct for survival and self-preservation. We have within us magnificent involuntary responses that allow us to flee from threat, avoid danger and if necessary. fight for our lives. We are programmed to save our own lives. Startle us and an incredible natural dynamic is set off - adrenaline pumps, muscles tighten, pupils widen, hair stands up, digestion stops, - to protect life. If you have had the privilege of being with someone during the last hours of life you know that we do not relinquish life easily.

And, yet, we are never more alive than when we are investing ourselves so thoroughly in an activity, a pursuit, a person, that for a glorious moment we lose ourselves.

When have you been most fully alive? My guess is that your answer will be those times when you were so thoroughly involved in something other

than yourself, that you lost yourself. Some activity that demanded so much of you, called so much out of you, that you didn't have time to be aware of self. We have, I would suggest, each of us, experienced the truth that to find life you have to lose life, in the simple denial of self which is part and parcel of - having a baby, for instance, in caring for an infant, or practicing the piano, or running a race, or making love, or arguing a case, or teaching a class or fretting about a teenager.

It is the essence of Christian faith. It is the radical alternative Christianity offers the world. It is the most powerful thing Jesus ever said. And - it is a revolutionary idea because it confronts, head on, the most powerful motif of our culture, which says quite the opposite - that the best way to live is not to give life away but to enhance it, to celebrate it, protect it, make it secure, preserve it, indulge it... "Be your own best friend. Go on, you deserve it..."

The book everyone has been talking about for the past several years is Habits of the Heart, by Robert Bellah and four other University of California sociologists. The purpose was to get at the prevailing belief system in our culture - our "habits of the heart." The authors interviewed and analyzed and concluded that the prevailing value in America at the time is "individualism"; not the old fashioned kind that was pointed to the public good, but a new, nasty form, that is pointed at the individual. Today's individualism, Bellah argues, is a freedom from constraints in order to do whatever it is I want to do. It is greed, baptized with political orthodoxy: selfishness becomes fashionable, covetousness becomes economically viable. It is a new morality... It is Sammy Davis, Jr. wailing "I Gotta Be Me"; and Sinatra's "I Did It My Way." Its philosophic vision seems to be - "more next year than last."

Its political expression works hard to protect privilege and the opportunity for wealth to generate more wealth, while relegating concern for the poor, hungry, sick and homeless to a private sector which simply cannot cope with the enormity of the problems.

Just last week Washington announced an effort to reduce public assistance to the poor by the value of charitable assistance given to them by churches and other benevolent organizations. That's individual freedom turned inward. That's individualism which has become selfishness.

Former U. S. Senator, John Culver, was talking with a Senate aid who hoped to run for office. "I asked him why he wanted to go into politics. What was it about conditions in the country that he would like to see changed for the better." He answered: "Senator, that just isn't the way you get elected any more." [Washington Post, 6/14/87]

There are signs that we are learning that the "new narcissism" doesn't work.

In a new book on spirituality, the author, a Catholic priest, reflects what many of us know deeply... "This is the human condition... we wake up in the middle of the night, or in the middle of our loneliness, and we feel we need to add something or someone to our life." [see Martin Marty, Context, 9/15/87]

The psychological disciplines confirm that need and our emptiness when it is ~~not~~ being met.

Eric Erickson taught that in maturity what we need is something he called "generativity" - the caring for and nurturing of the next generations. The danger, he taught, is that if we don't find someone or something to call that "generativity," that nurturing out of us, we stagnate and experience personal impoverishment. He taught that "such individuals often begin to indulge themselves as if they were their own - one and only child." [see James Fowler, The Stages of Faith, p. 85]

Jesus declared that the greatest happiness is in giving rather than getting, letting go rather than protecting, opening one's hands rather than clutching tightly. Jesus said you have to learn to lose your life, if you want to have it.

You won't find that taken seriously in many places in this world. Peter, theologically orthodox, confessionally - right on the money - stumbled all over that part. He learned it later. He learned to live by giving his life away and the simple truth is that we limit our own lives if we can't hear this.

If we are so afraid of getting hurt that we can't love another person, we are already dying, according to Jesus.

If we are too afraid of coming in last to enter the race, we are already dying.

If we are too concerned about job security to tell the truth, we are already dying.

If you're too busy - to lose yourself in a child, in a social problem, the pursuit of justice, or in the building of a better world - you're not really alive fully.

If we are too afraid of public opinion to risk contradicting it, we are already dying.

If we are too worried about the future, our security, to open our hearts and give something precious - in a moment of passionate extravagance, if our hold on life is too tight for that, we're already in trouble, according to Jesus.

Some, of course, have learned it. Celia, in T. S. Eliot's play, chose life. Those who know it and live it are our saints. And because they gave life away, they live forever. And sometimes, thank God, we learn it too. Less dramatically than our saints, but sometimes we learn that when we love deeply and selflessly, the life we give away - is given back to us.

Jesus - the one who said the words - proceeded to live them. Given a variety of alternatives, he chose not to think first of his own security. At the age of thirty-three he decided that there were some things more

important than survival. And in that terrible but beautiful drama, which ends on a cross, you and I see the truth, that this precious gift of life - which God has given us - is meant to be lived fully, without holding back, given away to the people and duties and hopes which God also has given us and to which God calls us.

"Pick up your cross," he said, "follow me... Find your life by losing it." Amen.